

Culture in Korean Drama towards Influencing Malaysian Audiences

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ABSTRACT

The globalization of Korea culture, particularly in Asia was clearly seen through their television drama series and have become the favourite media genre especially among Malaysian viewers. The purpose of this study is to understand how the Korean culture in Korean drama able to influence Malaysian audiences. This research uses qualitative method to address the research problems. The aims are to investigate human phenomena, interpretations and meaning that are unknown and needed to be explored. This further enforces the reason behind why the researcher has decided to use qualitative method as the research methodology as it enables the researcher to understand why and how Korean dramas have been successful in having a big impact on Malaysian's audiences. The researcher uses ethnographic design concept in order to apprehend the impact of Korean dramas on Malaysian audiences by learning the similarities between both cultures. The researcher employed the in-depth interview method. In order to clarify the data obtained is valid and true, researcher has also conducted pragmatic validity process. The finding shows that Korean dramas satisfy Asian audiences' emotional needs by being easy to assimilate to a similar life style, cultural proximity and expressiveness.

Keywords:

television drama, favourite media genre, Korean culture, Malaysian mix culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of Korea through the acceptance of its culture in Asia was achieved rapidly. Subsequently, its popularity spread to various European countries and also, worldwide. In particular, interest in Korean television dramas, songs and movies escalated rapidly across North and Southeast Asia, specifically in Japan, China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand.

Kim and Ryoo (2007) noted "Hallyu (or the Korean Wave) and other cultural trends from Asia have gained popularity in the region since they represent something that is closer to home without racial or ethnic stigmatizing of their race and ethnic groups often found in cultural products from the West. The yearning to belong and to become a part of the mainstream drives the popularity of Hallyu in Asia. Though there may be different forms of suffering and exploitation in Hallyu dramas and movies, but they are different from what we see in Hollywood movies, which tend to parallel discrimination based on race and ethnicities present in the US" (Kim and Ryoo, 2007, pg. 134).

2. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Malaysia is unique because of its diverse racial composition, its British colonial history and its melting pot of cultures. The main ethnic groups comprise the Malays, being the largest in number, followed by the Chinese, Indians and others. Due to its colonial past, Malaysia was largely exposed to the western media but in recent years, a new phenomenon emerged with the growing popularity of Korean dramas aired by Malaysian television networks such as TV2, TV3, NTV7, Channel 8, and Astro (channel 391 and 393). The internet also provides many Korean readily available entertainment sites for interested viewers.

Kim (2007) observed that the rapid rise of the Korean Wave in Malaysia has left scholars in a state of shock and perplexity, concluding that the Korean culture craze also evident in other Asian countries, has led researchers to seek better understanding of this sudden phenomena. Hence, she suggested that the increased interest in Korean dramas also developed the younger generation's admiration for Korean culture, language and fashion. What would be very significant to examine is how a multiracial country like Malaysia, rich in its history and cultural heritage, would be easily influenced by the influx of Korean dramas although both countries do not share any significant history.

In addition, Malaysia is not the only country that has been influenced Korean pop culture but this includes others Asian countries as well. As Chua (2010) observed, the increased interest in Korean pop culture developed rapidly in East and Southeast Asia, so that Korean films and Korean television dramas have become the television viewer's or movie goer's staple diet. This is compounded by the airing they receive in television stations and also in the marketing of Korean drama DVDs. Lee (2004), Cho (2005), Kim and Ryoo (2007), Tunstall (2008) and Ju (2010) also highlighted that even in Korea, such drama has become the preferred media genre amongst most television viewers. Having said that, Kim (2009) noted that the popularity of Korean music and dramas has brought heated discussions around East and Southeast Asia since the end of 1990s. Previous studies on Korean dramas argued two major areas: the first argument is that the factor that has helped the success of Korean dramas is their less expensive market price. Kim (2007), Yeon (2008) and Ryo (2009) mentioned that apart from audiences' acceptance, beauty, good looks and celebrity culture, another main factor that has been able to attract most people to buy Korean products is that they are comparatively cheaper than Japanese and Hong Kong dramas. Apart from that, this phenomenon also raises the issue of the impact of Korean drama penetration into the Malaysian market, thus also their influence on the minds of Malaysians. Salleh (2011) who researched the impact of Western dramas on the audiences'

minds found that most Malaysians viewed television, especially foreign dramas, solely for entertainment. Essentially, they obtained new ideas from these Western productions and were not easily accepting of any new ideas that contradicted with their core values, especially so if they touched their religious beliefs. They were more accepting of new ideas only if it brought betterment their lives. Indeed, many recognized the generally higher standards of living shown in western dramas but this did not influence them to want to move countries or adopt Western lifestyles (Salleh, 2011).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTION

The popularity of the Korean dramas in East and Southeast Asia with their own culture and approach has clearly shown the need for other countries, especially Malaysia to study and better understand how the Koreans managed to penetrate international markets and at the same time be able to maintain their culture. The objective of this study is:

- To understand the Korean culture in Korean drama influencing Malaysian audiences. Based on the identified research gaps, the following research question is:
- How does Korean culture in Korean drama able to influence Malaysian audiences?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ching (2000), Ju (2010) and Vu (2011) previously linked the success of Korean drama and Korean Wave with culture. In fact, most of the researchers were also acknowledged the roles of the Korean culture in contributing to the success. Due to that, it is crucial to understand what makes the Korean culture able to attract a lot of interest and attention to the other Asian countries including Malaysia. This study will look into the studies done by the previous researchers related to culture and media.

Korean popular culture (KPC) has achieved unprecedented worldwide recognition, beginning in East and Southeast Asian countries, and then spreading to China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan (Hong & Kim, 2013). Its popularity is now extended to the Middle East, former Soviet Union countries in Central Asia, and several European countries. This widespread impetus has been made possible by the varied and hybrid KPC productions that are rigorously communicated (Segers, 2000; Hong & Kim, 2013). Korean culture has contributed its role into shaping Korean capitalism distinctive form and nature instead of just borrowing from or simply adopting Western capitalism. According to Hanhee (2003), when the Korean economic system was underdeveloped, Korean culture took responsibility for the malfunction. Due to this, as Korea began to emerge as an advance industrial country; there has been an emphasis on cultural contribution which determined the function of culture in the nation (Hanhee, 2003).

According to Western researchers, Neo-Confucianism was a major influence towards culture practiced by the Koreans resulting in distinctive nature of their culture. At the same time, influences from the Neo-Confucianism have established a Korean lineage system that has a strong patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal system which basically was also developed from China and Japan (Hanhee, 2003). The concept of cultural hybridization implies that there must be similarities between the host and foreign cultures, so that the similarities facilitate the marketing of the new product. In other words, cultural proximity is vital for a more successful introduction of the cultural product (Iwabuchi, 2002). This explains why KPC is readily accepted in

varying Asian countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, China, and Thailand.

As Iwabuchi (2001, p. 56) claims, KPC provides “a sense of living in the shared time and common experience of a certain (post)modernity which cannot be represented well by American popular culture” This likens it to the idea of a middlebrow culture, in that firstly, its easy acceptability due to shared cultural backgrounds and secondly, the superficial and varied nature of pop culture that easily attracts the attention of the population (Hong & Kim, 2013). However, some degree of apprehensiveness was evident amongst culturally conservative generations in China and Taiwan, who felt that Korean Popular Culture (KPC) had an initial, intoxicating effect on their younger generations (Shim, 2006). Asian culture is unique. While American pop culture has successfully made inroads into Asian countries with minimal resistance, thus there is a sense of “emptiness” experienced by consumers of this foreign culture, stemming from the lack of cultural proximity (Shim, 2006).

As mentioned previously, Korean programs are able to satisfy Asian emotional needs as they are easily assimilated in a similar cultural context, cultural proximity and expressiveness. The preference of Korean programs showed that Asians express sympathy for Asian cultural frames including family morals, highly morality and love and sacrifice (Kim, 2004a). Asian cultural values are similar to Confucian values, but with different orientations. These different value orientations of the Asian culture market are summarized as follows:

Firstly, the Asians emphasize ‘harmony’ which may be adapted to new situations, although its strict morals cannot be compromised. These reflect the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism that emphasize interdependence within social relationships. (Kim, 2004a). Second, for industrialized countries such as Taiwan, Japan, Singapore and Korea, time is emphasized in solving issues, besides cooperation, compensation, life in organizations and the environment (Kim, 2004a). Third, the Asian culture emphasizes space, especially in relationships. Also, as Kim (2004) suggested, “it places a high value on order, has a higher tolerance for hierarchy and deductive-oriented cultures that emphasize abstract thinking and the reality of ideas, moral values, theories, and principles.” In capitalist modern times, Asian culture was attained through a chain of historical events and the individual’s personal life experiences (Ju, 2010).

The ‘Korean Wave’ achieved popularity in Southeast Asia due to cultural proximity and cultural relevance that Korean media products have with other Southeast Asian societies (Shim 2013; Suh Cho & Kwon 2013). The phenomenon gained impetus across Asia due to great support from Korean media corporations and the Korean government. Its widespread popularity was augmented by an audience-centred approach, Pan-Asian consumerism and fan-based communities. Having said that, Lewis, Martin and Sun (2012) stated that a new liberalism in Asia, characterized by a consumer and choice based transnational TV genre, facilitated the spread of the wave. It is characterized by complex cultural exchange between Korean content producers and Southeast Asia ‘Korean Wave’ consumers, and the power of the wave to lead content creation for popular cultural producers in Southeast Asia. (Peichi, 2014). Effectively, it emerged as “a form of pop nationalism that allows the nation-state to engage the forces of globalization in order to produce a transnational popular culture” (Joo 2011). The wave was also seen as a form of cultural diplomacy, as the promotion

of Korean culture capitalized on cultural themes that resonate with Asian consumers.

For example, according to Cho (2010) “Korean-Malaysian relations have improved with the rise of ‘Korean Wave’ in Malaysia. Many Malaysians develop favourable views toward Korean society through their consumption of popular Korean television dramas” (Cho 2010). This was agreed by Shim (2011) which he mentioned “the popularity of Korean celebrity also has contributed to closer ties between the Korean government and other Southeast Asian countries. For instance, Korean idol group U-Kiss paid a visit to Singapore to participate in a youth event that was prepared for local politician during the general election in 2011. In this event, both the Korean ambassador of Singapore and local politician also attended to support the ‘The Kings of Freedom Concert’ and to celebrate the Korean-Singapore relations” (Peichi, 2014).

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Television effects have been the most researched among media studies (Livingstone, 1998). Methodologically, mass communication scholars have created various models for researching television effects. Straubharr’s theory of cultural proximity (1991, 1996) illuminates existing region-centered media flows. Cultural proximity defines how transnational media content from an adjacent geographic region or a region similar in other aspects, has greater influence on audiences residing in that particular region. Therefore, as for this study, the theoretical journey into the Korean media strategy conducted from the perspective of the theory of Cultural.

6. METHODOLOGY

For this study, the researcher uses qualitative method to address the research problems. This method is best used as it aims to investigate human phenomena and investigate interpretations and meaning that are unknown and needed to be explored. Literature reviews may yield insufficient information about the study and thus more information are needed to be gathered through exploration from participants (Creswell, 2014). Hennick, Hutter & Baily (2011) concluded that qualitative research is most suitable to address ‘why’ questions to explain and understand issues or ‘how’ questions that describe processes or behaviour. This further enforces the reason behind why the researcher has decided to use qualitative method as the research methodology as it enables the researcher to understand why and how Korean dramas have been successful in having a big impact on Malaysian’s audiences.

For this study, the researcher uses ethnographic design concept in order to apprehend the impact of Korean dramas on Malaysian audiences by learning the similarities between both cultures. This enables the researcher to grasp an understanding on why Korean dramas have been successful in capturing the interest of Malaysian audiences. To achieve the data required for this study, the researcher employed the in-depth interview method. Four respondents, (2) from the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and another two (2) from the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) were interviewed face-to-face. In order to clarify the data obtained is valid and true, researcher has conducted pragmatic validity process whereby four (4) participants from Malaysian creative industries expert been chosen. They are composed of two Malaysian drama’s production, a Media Prima Brand Management Officer and a Senior Associate Compliance

& Presentation Astro Malaysia. They are people who are qualified and experienced in their respective fields. They provide a view on the phenomenon of Korean drama that happens in Malaysia.

To description the data, the researcher use themes to analyse qualitative data. The themes are organized into layers, from basic elementary themes to more specific ones. Layering involves s representing the data using interconnected levels of themes (Creswell, 2012). The researcher subsumes minor themes within major themes and includes major themes within broader themes. The entire analysis becomes more and more complex as the researcher works upward toward broader and broader levels of abstraction. Through recognizing these layers, it helps researcher to understand the use of themes in layered qualitative analysis.

The next step in the process of analysing the data is to code the data. In the coding process, the raw data collected are then segmented and labelled to form descriptions and broad themes in the data. This process is essential in order to make sense out of the text data and narrowing the data collected into relevant themes (Creswell, 2012).

7. FINDING

7.1 Korean Culture

In focusing on Korean culture, the respondents show the incredible passion of Korean dramas on culture. Korean culture is somewhat an incorporation of culture between Japan and China. It has also been able to be modernized without becoming too westernized. According to the interviewees, the Korean culture has been capable to feed the large appetites of Asian viewers. Korean culture can be represented by the widely shared values of Koreans. Choe (2000) and Duk (2003), described, values are handed down from previous generations, and they caused people to act according to the existing values, persuading them to believe that this is the right and proper way to act.

The concept of Korean culture as explained by Choes (2002a) and Duk (2003) is on the shared values of Koreans. As such, he mentioned about the value of high collectivism, authoritarianism (gwonwijuui), high anxiety, long-term orientation, and high enthusiasm (sinmyeong) as the core of and unique to Korean culture. According to the respondent, they (Korean culture) have their own traditional value and traditional uniqueness even though they are surrounded by a variety of other culture. Therefore, to create the acceptance from other countries, they express the culture through dramas. In short, the values of Korean culture can be shown clearly in their dramas. Due to this, the respondent feels that the culture can be shared and accepted by other Asian countries such as Malaysia. This reflects that Korean is sharing their culture with others whilst observing others as reciprocity. Despite Korean culture being new to Malaysian audiences, they (Malaysian) are able to accept of Korean culture because they are used to diversity found in Malaysian culture.

7.2 Malaysian Mix Culture

Undoubtedly, Malaysia is a unique country with various races and diversified cultures. The Korean media believe that with these advantages, Malaysians are more open to other cultures and capable to accept different perspectives. According to the respondents, these are the elements that the Malaysian audiences could accept and enjoy while watching Korean television dramas besides of its storyline.

An analysis above found that people would be interested to watch dramas that are more closely related to their own cultures even though they communicate with different languages and have to rely on subtitles in order to understand the storyline. Yet, the success of Korean dramas in Malaysia shows that language is clearly not a barrier for Malaysians to watch Korean dramas, but rather its similarity to real people that touches dominantly on human sensitivity such as lifestyle, value and family that has propels Korean dramas success in Malaysia. Korean programs satisfy Asian audiences' emotional needs by being easy to assimilate to a similar life style, cultural proximity and expressiveness. Korean dramas had been proven to successfully fill the 'emptiness' feeling that could not be filled by Western dramas. Korean dramas have been realistically able to associate its audiences' needs in terms of culture interests. As a result, all of these factors have contributed to a better chance of Korean dramas to be broadcasted in Malaysia. The preference of Korean programs over other types of shows indicated that Asians expressed sympathy for Asian cultural frames including family morals, highly morality and love & sacrifice. To better understand the data obtained from the Korean's respondents, a deep discussion was conducted with four people who are experienced and knowledgeable in Malaysian creative industries. They are composed of two Malaysian drama's production, a Media Prima Brand Management Officer and a Senior Associate Compliance & Presentation Astro. In the discussion, the data obtained from Korea revalued and viewed from the standpoint of Malaysian. To be fair this discussion below will only have touched on the data or information that can be evaluated by Malaysian creative industry. The results of these discussions are as follow:

7.3 Pragmatic Validity

Culture plays an important role in popularizing Korean drama. Korean dramas are different from other foreign dramas such as Thailand, India or Arab. Korean drama has its striking strength to place their culture in this country. As Changsu Pak (2010) has mentioned before that the Korean television dramas reflect Asian beliefs, way of life and value system, some of which are based on the teachings of Confucius, such as family ties, love or romance, respect for elders, loyalty, sibling love and emphasis on education.

According to Malaysian respondent, Korean dramas storyline is mostly similar to Malaysian life story in terms of cultural which meant the culture of the way of acting and thinking. In the context of respect, Korean drama has shown a same family value which is just like Malaysian where they still have respect to elders and they respect their family. These make us feel easy as there is still an east civility in Korean dramas. In terms of romance is very subjective, but the way they expressed the feeling and taste are very much similar to Malaysian culture". Apart from that, the Asian people actually have their own value in what been called as Asian cultural which could drive these people to get closer. Asian are unique and different to Western where they can freely do, as for example kissing in front of others and sexual freedom. However, this kind of behavior are not allowing in Asians. They still have a scene where they show their love but still constrained by politeness. That is one of the main reason Korean dramas being acceptance in Malaysia. There are a lot of dramas and cultures but it is still a western culture, for instance, we are still imitating and not rooted in our own culture. Actually, in our drama we still have our own approach as we do have a traditional storyline with respect on our culture but unfortunately we are very easy to absorb other people's

cultures. For example, we absorb the Indian culture, western culture and we could see that Malaysian is so easy to absorb others. However, despite the fact that the culture enjoyment, there is another element that been highlighted by Korean dramas which rare in western dramas particularly teaching audiences to think. It was evident when Changsu Pak (2010) also discussed the matters. He said that for example, as shown in the Korean drama 'Dae Jang Geum' (Jewel in the Palace), a heartwarming story of an orphaned cook who excelled into becoming the first woman doctor of the king in the royal court of the 16th century Korea. This drama has a lot of family values, derived from Confucianism and the real East Asia sentiment of life.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Obviously, people would be interested to watch dramas that are more closely related to their own cultures even though they communicate with different languages and have to rely on subtitles in order to understand the storyline. The rise of Korean dramas in Malaysia clearly shows that language has not become a barrier for Malaysians to watch Korean dramas, but rather its similarity to real people that touches dominantly on human sensitivity such as lifestyle, value and family that has propels Korean dramas success in Malaysia. Korean dramas satisfy Asian audiences' emotional needs by being easy to assimilate to a similar life style, cultural proximity and expressiveness. Korean dramas had been proven to successfully fill the 'emptiness' feeling that could not be filled by Western dramas. Korean dramas have been realistically able to associate its audiences' needs in terms of culture interests. As a result, all of these factors have contributed to a better chance of Korean dramas to be broadcasted in Malaysia. It also shows that the interest of audience is closely related to the culture of the country, the sensitivity of the country as well as the trend of age needs. The culture influences the audience even from the point of belief or ages. Understanding the needs of the audiences are a key element in the acceptance of Korean dramas production in Malaysia. This study contributes to Korean media literature in several ways. Firstly, the finding that it is worthy to foster and cultivate culture and Asian values through the media, also complements a substantial body of research supporting the significance of Korean media strategy in shaping their productions for audiences in foreign markets.

It is a unique and interesting to note that the Korean media able to develop strategies and approaches to get the audience's attention from foreign countries. The Korean media is using its strong culture, beliefs, values, and at the same time does not miss the reality of life such as love, family, sacrifice and loyalty in its drama productions. This concept distinguishes the Korean drama from other Western popular dramas as Korean drama captivated the audience by bringing the audience to remain realistic by focusing on human nature. The theory of cultural proximity as explained by Straubhaar (2003), "the tendency to prefer media products from one's own culture or the most similar possible culture". Cultural proximity defines how transnational media content from a neighborhood country or a country that is similar, exercises influence on audiences residing in that particular area (Ju, 2010). This concept is useful in explaining how foreign and domestic media can attract audiences from an international context. It was found that cultural factors such as dressing, nonverbal communication, humors, religion, music, and narrative styles played a mediating role in audience preferences (Sinclair, 1996b).

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